

## Eastern Washington Agriculture and Food Processing Partnership

Site Visit: February 13-14, 2002

### Grantee Information

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### Background

The Eastern Washington Agriculture and Food Processing Partnership (EWAFFPP) evolved from the Agriculture and Food Processing Labor/Management Committee (LMC) that was formed in 1995. The LMC was assembled as part of a strategy of the state of Washington to bring labor and management together to respond to crises such as plant closings and large-scale layoffs. The state of Washington routinely convenes labor-management committees to address layoffs caused by plant closures or substantial downsizing. What was unique about the LMC in Washington was that it encompassed multiple employers, crossed the agriculture and food processing industries, and was focused on more than a crisis response. The committee was formed to address structural changes in agriculture and food processing that had resulted in introduction of more sophisticated technologies, elimination of many very low-skill jobs, and demand for more workers with technical training. While labor and management comprise a majority of the LMC, it also includes state government, community colleges, workforce development councils, and community-based organizations.

The LMC spawned the EWAFFPP, which includes the same constituencies and broadens involvement. In general, the meetings of the LMC are attended by senior management participants and the EWAFFPP by operational-level representatives such as human resources directors. The history of collaboration driven by employers and labor meant that the partnership hit the ground running. Also, the Washington governor made a personal commitment to goals of the partnership. He personally attended a project event and challenged the project to increase its training goals. The state also invested \$500,000 for incumbent worker training through the partnership, and this funding was deeply

integrated into the strategy of the grant project. Thus, the DOL grant was simply one piece in a broad, long-term vision of how the agriculture and food processing workforce must improve.

## **Strategy**

The project focused on the agriculture and food processing industries, both of which are experiencing dramatic change and are vital to the economy of the region. Since agricultural growers are direct suppliers of the food processing industry, it is somewhat surprising that the two did not come together previously to examine their mutual concerns about workforce development. The partnership provides a forum in which they can do so. Also at the table, however, are virtually all of the stakeholders necessary to implement solutions. These include organized labor, workforce development councils (the name used by Washington workforce investment boards), community colleges, private training providers, and community-based organizations.

An important strategy of the project was to challenge the two industries to identify jobs common to both. While it might seem obvious that a refrigeration technician working for a packing company would have a similar role to one working in a food processing plant, that was not a given for the partners. In the facilitated environment of the project, they were able—for the first time—to review systematically the various job classifications and identify those that were present in both industries. This was done with a combination of employer surveys and work-group meetings.

Once this stage was completed, the partnership turned its attention to developing skill standards for the common jobs. While breaking new ground, the process was surprisingly straightforward and appeared to crystallize latent opportunities.

Next, the project sought to develop a skill-gap-assessment model that could be used by employers to determine the skills status of their incumbent and entering workers and to measure their progress through a hierarchy of skills that met four identified skill standards. As noted in the Outcomes section, which begins on page 6, this stage required enormous effort and skilled facilitation in order to achieve success.

It was expected that, from the research for and development of the skill-gap-assessment model, a job ladder would be developed. A model for this had been created by the Hospitality Business Alliance in the region, and the project expects to pattern its job ladder after that one.

The strategic approach of the project to create training curricula was very pragmatic. Once the common jobs and skill standards had been created, the project staff turned to the education partners in both the public and private sectors to identify *existing* curricula that could be used or adapted to meet employer needs. At this stage, the project also confronted the need for scheduling and delivery of training to be adapted to respond to the requirements of employers. Generally, this meant shorter, more intensive training and flexible start dates that might not correspond to traditional semesters. It is planned that approximately 50 individuals will receive this training prior to completion of the demonstration.

In addition to the training funded directly by the grant, the EWAFPP has integrated incumbent worker training supported by state dollars into its overall effort. Development of this training was informed by the research and employer-led process created by the project. Through this remarkable leveraging of resources, training seen by employers has been accelerated and expanded, thus reinforcing the value of their participation in the demonstration.

Another aspect of the project is coordinated through the Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board. The board engaged the Northwest Policy Center, housed at Washington State University, to develop an industry survey of employers to determine their knowledge of skill standards and identify future training needs. In addition, they will evaluate the training results at the end of the project.

## **Skills Shortage/Needs Assessment**

Over the years, the LMC has attempted to monitor and understand the worker skill shortages facing employers. By surveying agricultural and food processing employers in the region through many consecutive research projects over several years (some prior to the DOL and state funding), the LMC brought a wealth of knowledge to the project. This research directly influenced the shape of the project, including the identification of common jobs, determination of the skill standards and gaps, development and revision of the skill-gap-assessment model, and development of training.

Creation of a tool that employers could use to assess current and entering workers was a major effort of the demonstration and one which was much more difficult than expected. For a discussion of the resulting skill-gap assessment for individuals, see item 3 of the Outcome section, which begins on page 6.

## Roles of Key Partners

Several organizations played key roles in this project. The project partners are listed and described below.

**Employers:** Employers, along with organized labor, are a majority of the LMC. They are the driving force that shapes the direction of the partnership. Employers report that the collaboration has now taken root so deeply that they no longer have to “bang the table” to make their points. All of the partners understand the needs of the employers, and they support the project’s efforts to meet them. Attendance at a partnership meeting reveals that employers drive the process, with all other members engaged in a meaningful way. Reaching this point took substantial time and effort, going back to the inception of the LMC.

**Workforce development system:** The four workforce development councils (WDCs) in the region are all active partners in the project. They are under contract to participate in most aspects of the project, including working with employers in their areas to identify workers to participate in the pilot training. It appears that they operate very autonomously in carrying out their roles.

**Public sector:** The Washington State Employment Security Department initiated the LMC. It continues to be deeply connected to the efforts the committee has undertaken, including the EWAFFP. The department has also funded a \$500,000 incumbent worker grant to complement the federal skill shortages grant. Likewise, the Office of Trade and Economic Development participates actively in both strategic and operational aspects of the partnership.

One reason for the state’s role is that the LMC provides something that the state needs. It is difficult for the state to deal with unorganized industries; it is hard to know who—if anyone—can speak for them. The LMC provided a needed voice for the agriculture and food processing industries in the region, bringing credibility and capability to the dialogue with the state.

**Education and training providers:** The community colleges in the region have been pushed hard by the project. They are developing some of the curricula, using the skill standards created through the project, and delivering training.

Employers have made it very clear that they need education and training to be provided in a timely, flexible, and responsive manner. For those employers, the traditional semester schedule is irrelevant.

The seriousness of this particular disconnect is illustrated by the fact that for an ammonia refrigeration course that was offered by a community college, some employers chose to send their workers out of state instead—at more than twice the cost—just to get a training schedule and curriculum that met their needs.

While the partnership has worked hard to draw the community colleges into the project, only two of the five have become involved in a meaningful way; one has simply chosen not to participate at all. One project partner summarized the situation and perspective of the community colleges as an issue of their “comfort zone.” That zone does not include many of the core needs of employers, and so it must expand if employers’ needs are to be met. For any individual or institution, that change of “comfort zone” can be a disorienting and disconcerting process. Clearly, some progress has been made, but many partners are disappointed by its pace.

The presence of private training institutions has provided a real alternative for employers. Much of the training completed to date has been developed and delivered by those institutions. This competitive fact appears not to be lost on the community colleges, and at least those most engaged in the project seem committed in principle to responding to employer needs. They perceive themselves as operating for the first time in a functioning educational marketplace. In addition to this competition, there may be some opportunities for the community colleges to partner with the private providers; already one private provider has delivered a training at a community college. Such an arrangement could be of benefit to the community colleges as they move through this transition.

For several of the colleges, the project provided new connections to employers, industry associations, and employer-led consortia. Absent the project, these connections would not have developed so quickly.

**Labor unions:** The Teamsters and Operating Engineers unions both played important, collaborative roles in the project. It was largely because the unions and employers were able to forge meaningful working relationships that the project had substantial power among the other stakeholders. The Washington State Labor Council/AFL-CIO has also been deeply involved. That organization is very interested in career ladders and workforce development.

**Others:** One community-based organization, the Yakima Valley Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC), has been a very active participant in the project. The group has participated in the

planning and development of the project and is conducting worker assessments and providing case management services. It acts as a subcontractor to the Yakima Valley Workforce Development Council.

## **Outcomes**

Ten objectives were included in the grant proposal. They are listed below, along with a description of progress towards achieving them.

*Objective #1: Create new or amended industry skill standards for the common job categories of machine operator and maintenance between agriculture and food processing.*

To begin the process of finding commonalities across the two industries, project staff reviewed existing skill standards for a variety of jobs in both. They then convened an initial meeting with agriculture and food processing employers to explore commonalities among jobs using their review as a base. At a subsequent meeting, education partners were added. Between meetings, employers were surveyed about job requirements. An additional employer task force was conducted. From this research and development process, six jobs were identified as possible targets for joint action. The group then narrowed the list to the top two priorities: ammonia refrigeration and electrical/electronics.

*Objective #2: Plan and conduct four worker-skill panels to determine two new or amended standards based on the two common job categories. Analyze data and produce two agriculture and food processing skill standards.*

Using a collaborative, employer-led process, skill standards have been developed for both job categories identified in Objective #1.

*Objective #3: Conduct incumbent worker research with employers to identify basic and technology skill shortages.*

Surveys of employers have been fielded by the research team under contract with the project. This research explores the difficulties that employers have in hiring and retaining skilled workers. It also asks about expected needs over the next five years, sources of workers, skill gaps and training needs, and industry skill standards. While it appears that this research comes fairly late in the project, it will be of great value to the LMC as it maps out future training ventures using other funding streams.

*Objective #4: Design and implement a model skill-gap assessment and a skill-upgrade plan; design a job ladder for wage progression to include the new and existing skill standards.*

After a long, sometimes difficult process, a four-stage skill-gap-assessment model has been completed. The four stages are:

- *Assessment of interest*, which assesses an individual against a profile of successful workers.
- *Assessment of core manufacturing skills*, including basic and employability skills and manufacturing knowledge using the CASAS, TABE, or WorkKeys, as appropriate. The National Occupational Competency Testing Institute (NOCTI) Assessment will be used for the core manufacturing assessment.
- *Assessment of technical skills*, which examines technical knowledge and skills using NOCTI.
- *Assessment of company-specific skills*, which will be used by companies to add their own skill requirements to the model.

Some of the difficulties in creating the skill-gap-assessment model arose because of the different perspectives on assessment held by the employers, community colleges, and workforce investment boards that participated in the meetings. The resolution was driven mainly by the needs and interests of employers.

*Objective #5: Through an employer focus group, design a job ladder for wage progression.*

As of the date of the site visit, this task had not yet progressed. Subsequent to the visit, the project director created a draft for review by the project partners.

*Objective #6: Select, integrate, and customize curricula based on findings that will train to identified skill gaps.*

Curriculum development is driven by employer input in the form of participation in the partnership and systematic research. Community colleges and private training providers have both assisted in curriculum development, but with one exception the curriculum development that has been completed was carried out by private training providers.

As noted above, the explicit strategy of the project was to seek existing curricula that either met employer needs or could be adapted to do so. By avoiding “ground-up” development, the project leadership believes that funds have been leveraged very effectively. Delivery methods include interactive classroom and work-site-based training. To date, no distance learning has been developed.

*Objective #7: Conduct pilot training for approximately 50 participants who will receive an assessment, plan development, supportive services (as needed), and ongoing counseling and case-management services combining classroom, on-the-job, and distance learning, concentrating on “real-time education delivery,” meeting employers’ skilled-worker shortages.*

Potential trainees are being identified by the employers and workforce investment boards that are partners in the project. In addition to the pilot training funded by the DOL grant, the partnership has deployed training funded by the state of Washington in the form of the \$500,000 grant mentioned earlier. For employers, this state funding has meant they could receive more incumbent worker training sooner than would otherwise have been possible. Because they have been so thoroughly integrated in terms of selection of skill priorities and development of curricula, progress for training funded by both the state and federal grants is reported together. Most of the training delivery thus far has been by the private providers, with only one or two offerings by the community colleges. The total already far exceeds the goal for the pilot training alone. As of the end of February 2002, it includes:

<b>Training</b>				
<b>Type</b>	<b>Sessions</b>	<b>Enrollees</b>	<b>Completers</b>	<b>In Training</b>
Entry Level PLC	6	66	66	0
Advanced PLC	2	25	25	0
Ammonia Refrigeration	3	104	104	0
Intro to Food Processing	2	34	32	0
Warehouse Spanish	1	23	20	0
Motor Control	1	16	16	0
Forklift Operator	1	10	10	0
Vineyard Equipment Operator	2	65	0	65
Tree-Fruit Farm Equipment	1	100	0	100
Electrical (five types)	5	68	56	0
Hydraulics I & II	2	28	15	0
Welding (two types)	2	46	46	0
Tractor Maintenance	1	8	8	0
Sprayer Calibration	1	12	0	0
Irrigation Management	1	12	0	0
Small Engine Repair	1	14	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>398</b>	<b>165</b>

*Objective #8: Prepare and implement a worker and employer satisfaction survey for project evaluation.*

This survey is being developed by the research team but has yet to be fielded.

*Objective #9: Prepare and implement a partnership evaluation with all partners to assess the effectiveness of the collaborative process, the training model, and applicability to other industries.*

An evaluation design has been developed, and some data have been collected. It appears that the project has retained competent evaluators to carry out this work.

*Objective #10: Document the model emphasizing worker and employer outcomes, provide a plan for sustainability, and demonstrate application to other industries.*

See the discussion of sustainability immediately below.

## **Strategy for Sustainability**

With four months remaining in the grant period, there was no explicit plan for sustaining the momentum created by the project, although plans for the future were on the agenda for an upcoming meeting of the partnership. This is true despite the explicit intention of all partners to continue the work of the project.

Clearly, the LMC will continue and, with or without a plan, it will use the tools that have been created by the project. Also, the executive vice president of the Northwest Food Processors Association, which has been deeply involved in the project, indicates that the organization is applying the model in other states. He expects to use the assessment tool and other products of the project with many of the organization's members.

The project director has accepted a position with the Washington Workforce Training and Coordinating Council as associate director for workforce development system partnerships. While her departure makes for a potentially sensitive transition, in this role she will be an advocate for replicating the model used by the project. The new project director is the executive vice president of the Northwest Food Processors Association, which means that leadership will remain in the hands of a person who has a history with the LMC and the project and a deep understanding of employer needs.

Finally, the Employment & Training Division of the Washington State Employment Security Department and the Workforce Training and Education and Coordinating Board report intentions to

replicate the model across the state. They have already begun to apply what has been demonstrated in the project in other industries including health care.

## Key Accomplishments

- *Successfully broadened and deepened an existing partnership.* The LMC provides a strong base upon which this ambitious new venture could be built. According to the partners, the federal grant funds reinforced the value of participation in the LMC and allowed the group to move to a higher level of strategy and activity. This, of course, makes the LMC an even more important workforce player in the region and allows it to attract more employers and other partners, as well as additional external funding support.
- *Identified common jobs across the agriculture and food processing industries; developed skill standards for those jobs.* All parties agree that the two industries had never engaged in serious efforts to identify commonalities. The project succeeded at spotting a target of opportunity and capitalizing on it. This will likely lead to more and deeper cross-industry collaboration.
- *Created a four-stage worker-assessment tool with which to determine the training needs of each worker.* For employers, the idea of this tool appeared very abstract, and its potential value was unclear. The project staff was tenacious about pursuing it, however, and in the end the employers have come to see the value. This assessment tool is a product that could serve as a model for others.
- *Increased the understanding of the needs of employers among the stakeholders.* The new data and analysis of skill shortages and gaps have better informed all of the partners. This positions the community colleges, private providers, workforce development professionals, and others to work with more common focus to meet these needs and thus strengthen the workforce and economy of the region.
- *Integrated federal and state grant funds effectively.* Those working with public programs see only discrete barrels of money, and each is a different size and shape. The rules for what one must do before, during, and after reaching inside vary dramatically. Often this baffling array of rules, requirements, and conditions is visible to employers collaborating on workforce projects. This project, however, appears to have successfully insulated the employers from the process and

instead has positioned them to focus on the desired outcomes. Credit for this largely rests with the Tri-County Workforce Council, which handles administration of both grants.

## Lessons Learned

This project yielded a number of lessons that may be of national significance. Several of these are listed below.

- *Economies of scale create new possibilities.* By joining the agriculture and food processing industries, the project can create larger demand for training than could either industry alone. This means that more providers will be interested and, therefore, the quality and richness of their offerings should improve and their prices may even come down. While this confluence benefits all businesses, small firms that simply cannot afford most customized training may benefit the most.
- *Bureaucracy can be conquered.* Large institutions, particularly those in the public sector, can be bureaucratic in the worst sense of the word: slow, unresponsive, and bound by antiquated procedures. The employers credit the project with organizing the bureaucracy of the public sector systems and getting through it.
- *Some community colleges have not learned how to serve employers.* From the point of view of most project partners, the role of the community colleges has ranged from acceptable to abysmal. Two have taken lead roles and tried to understand and adapt to employer needs, but others have simply chosen not to do so. Employers have no patience for what they see as turf wars and a “what’s-in-it-for-me” mentality among the community colleges. The employers saw the role of private training organizations as a viable alternative to the community college system.
- *Labor/management collaborations attract other partners.* The Labor/Management Committee was the nucleus of the partnership and attracted other key players. This was because those others saw that if labor and management were together, something real was likely to happen. Virtually all of the necessary players in the agriculture/food processing/workforce development world came to the table for the project, partly because business and labor unions were at the head of that table.
- *A successful project requires strong, creative, strategic leadership.* This project was large, complex, and ambitious and so was fraught with potential problems. Some of these were avoided altogether, and others were resolved along the way. This would not have been possible without a

strong, experienced project manager and a leadership team that she could rely upon. An illustration is the decision of the project manager to bring private training providers into the project to meet needs that community colleges could not or would not meet. More than simply filling a gap, that decision demonstrated to the colleges that their environment had suddenly become competitive.

- *Federal and state dollars can be used together seamlessly.* The use of the federal grant dollars to support system building and state funds to pay for training expanded the scope of the project dramatically. It also served as a proof-point to employers in two ways. First, it told them that the expected disconnects between the federal and state governments could be bridged; and, second, it provided a deliverable—significant amounts of training—which the system-building grant from the federal government could not have paid for. This tangible result showed what the system building could lead to but did so in a much shorter time than would have been possible otherwise.